

What Works: Table Topics

By Edward Tanguay

A student who had been chosen as the Table Topics leader the previous class period stands up in front of the class and tells a story about a vacation he took to Berlin in December 1989. He tells about his feelings as he walked into West Berlin for the first time. Then he calls on another student, asks her to come up to the front of the class and tell about her experiences the first time she crossed the border from East to West. The Table Topics leader takes a seat and the student he had called on comes to the front and talks for about two minutes on her first experience in the West. Then she sits down, the Table Topics leader comes back up to the front, thanks her for her story, and continues his own story. He tells how he left the Wall, took a train through West Berlin to KDW, the largest department store in Europe. He tells about his feelings as he bought his first book by Nietzsche, an author who was banned in the GDR. He then calls on another student in the classroom and asks her to talk about something that she had been very excited to buy. The Table Topics leader sits down and listens with the rest of the class as this student comes to the front of the class and tells about the time she decided to buy a new car. She tells how she made her selection and how she felt when she bought it. After she ends her story, the Table Topics leader comes back up to the front, thanks the student for her story, and resumes his narrative. He continues telling parts of his story, intermittently asking students to come to the front to talk on a related subject. He calls on four students in this way, then ends his story by telling how he traveled back to his home in East Germany. He then takes a seat and the Table Topics session is finished.

Procedure

1. The teacher introduces Table Topics to a class by being a Table Topic leader himself. He tells the students that they need only to listen to the story and that they may be called on during the story to come to the front of the class and speak. Then the teacher begins telling his story.
2. At a natural break following a sub-story within the main story, the teacher calls upon a student to come to the front of the class and talk about a certain topic or theme relating to the sub-story. This topic should be general enough to enable the student to think of a story. The teacher then takes a seat with the class and the student must be ready to tell his/her story before reaching the front of the classroom. If s/he cannot think of anything to talk about within this time, the student will have to use stalling techniques while thinking of a story. S/he then tells a short story. After the student finishes, the teacher comes back to the front of the class, thanks the student for the story, makes comments about it, and continues with the main story.
3. The teacher continues in this way, calling on four students. After the fourth student has spoken, the teacher completes his story and thus ends the Table Topics session.
4. The teacher then explains to the class that what they have just experienced was called "Table Topics," and he asks for someone to be the Table Topics leader for the next class meeting. This

student will prepare a story with four breaks in it, at which point other students can be called upon to speak on a similar topic. A good time limit to set for a Table Topics session is 20 minutes. This means that the leader's story should last about 12 minutes with each of the four students called upon speaking two minutes each.

5. During the next class, the teacher simply asks the Table Topics leader to come to the front of the class to begin the session.

Rationale

"Table Topics" is an activity used by Toast Masters, International. The goal of this organization is to give its members experience in making speeches, thinking on their feet, and feeling comfortable expressing themselves in front of a group. In addition to allowing students to develop these same characteristics, Table Topics helps in the ESL classroom in the following ways:

1. Students become more attentive and involved with the leader's story in that they have to be thinking of similar experiences they have had in case they are called upon to speak. This builds listening skills and discussion-participation skills.
2. Students feel responsible to the group, which increases motivation and class cohesiveness.
3. The teacher is not the focus of class attention and is better able to monitor student performance. For example, s/he could take notes on grammatical mistakes or aspects of speaking such as volume, clarity, poise, posture, and gestures. These could then be reviewed after the Table Topics session.
4. This activity is useful to students of English for Special Purposes since the atmosphere is that of a business meeting or conference at which they must give a formal speech or comment on a specific topic that has come up during the meeting. In a relaxed and familiar group, Table Topics gives many students (five in 20 minutes) the opportunity to talk in front of a group.
5. Since the Table Topics leader has no limits in creating his story, he can use the vocabulary and range of language he knows to tell his story. This is also true for the students called upon, given that the Table Topics leader asks questions which are general in nature.

Ideas and Options

1. There is usually one student in every class who speaks more often and more comfortably than the others. Identify this student and ask him or her to be the first Table Topics leader.

2. After students have become familiar with the Table Topics procedure, certain students could be identified to critique the speeches. One could be the um-counter, that is, he could count the number of times each speaker says "um" or "uh" during his speech. Another could observe poise, another gestures, another volume, and another could do a general-effectiveness critique. After the Table Topics session, each could give feedback to each speaker.
3. After the session, students could vote for the best impromptu story.
4. The Table Topics session could be filmed and then shown to the students as feedback.

Edward Tanguay is a USIA English Teaching Fellow at Potsdam University in Potsdam, Germany. He teaches English, American studies, and computer courses.

References

- Munby, J. 1978. Communicative syllabus design. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brumfit, C. J. and K. Johnson. 1981. The communicative approach to language teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. and D. Davy. 1979. Investigating English style. London: Longman.
- Wang, L. Z. 1990. English language teaching in China. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, X. T. 1992. English teaching methodology. Beijing: Higher Education Press.